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## ETHICAL POSTULATES IN THEOLOGY.

By W. RUPP,  
Lancaster, Pa.

THE sciences of theology and ethics may be said generally to be related as are religion and morality. These, while distinct, are not separate. They mutually interpenetrate and condition each other. A sound state of morality presupposes a healthy form of religion; and, on the other hand, true religion can flourish only in connection with a sound and vigorous moral life. Moreover, moral and religious ideas mutually affect and modify each other. For example, a true Christian's moral sentiments would not permit him to commit murder or theft in the service of religion; nor would a Christian's religious principles suffer him to deny Christ or to profess atheism for the benefit of his country or for the advantage of the poor.

In like manner the sciences of theology and ethics mutually affect and condition each other. The fundamental principles of the one are presupposed in the other. Ethics makes use of ideas which, in their developed form at least, it derives from theology. For instance, the very foundation principle of ethics, namely, the principle of moral obligation, or of the moral law, is a theological idea. No system of ethics, and certainly no system of Christian ethics, can have a secure basis that does not start from the principle of the idea of God;<sup>1</sup> but the idea

<sup>1</sup> In taking this position we do not mean to deny that there may be morality without religion. Man is constitutionally a moral as well as religious being; and it is possible that one side of his nature may be developed, while the other side may remain comparatively latent. We hold, however, that this is an abnormal condition, and that morality cannot maintain itself long in purity and vigor without some development, at least, of the religious nature, which implies a conscious apprehension of an essential relation to God. Nor do we mean to deny that there may be a science of ethics without a formal recognition of the idea of God as the principle of moral obligation. Ethics may be treated merely as a branch of physics, or of biology, as Herbert Spencer, for instance, has treated it. The phenomena of moral life, or of conduct, may be regarded merely as effects of the process of natural evolution. As such they may be investigated, collected, classified. The product of such an operation is

of God is logically formulated in dogmatic theology, and accepted in ethics as its starting-point. At least this is the usual method. It is possible, of course, for the Christian moralist to develop the idea of God for himself in an *a priori* way ; as, for instance, Rothe does, who starts for this purpose from the notion of absolute pure being ; but in treatises on ethics this is not usually considered either convenient or necessary, as it would tend to confuse the two sciences of dogmatics and ethics. It is the business of dogmatic theology to develop and state in logical forms the ideas of the nature and attributes of God, which are given immediately in the Christian consciousness. But this very development of the idea of God involves the evolution also of ethical ideas ; for God is the primary moral being, and the religious conception of God must necessarily awaken the ethical ideas or principles which are latent in the human mind in consequence of its essential relation to God, who is the source of its existence. And the logical treatment of these ethical ideas gives us the science of ethics in its Christian form. Thus the science of ethics arises by the side of dogmatics, and claims a relatively independent position. It does not, however, sunder its connection with dogmatics. It admits dogmatic or theological

sometimes called *scientific ethics*. It is, however, in fact, rather a *natural history* of ethics than a *science* in the proper sense of the term. Science, especially moral science, has to do not merely with facts or phenomena, but with principles. It asks not merely *what*, but *why*. In ethics we have to do not merely with what is, but with what ought to be, and with the reason why it ought to be. We have, for instance, not understood the fact of conscience when we have enumerated what things it enjoins or forbids. We want to know *why* it enjoins or forbids—we want to know what is the source of its authority. Now, the conscience, by its very inability to grant any dispensation from its behests, proves that it is not itself the source of the authority which it exercises. That source must be without itself. What, then, is it ? A blind process of evolution, some may say ; the Christian theist will say, it is God, the holy and righteous author of our being. This is the point at which even philosophical, or truly scientific, ethics must at last arrive. All intuitionist ethics must posit a moral principle outside of the individual personality as the ground of the sense of moral obligation. And this is the point from which Christian or theological ethics will start. It will assume that the primordial moral principle is one with the personal God of Christian faith, the complete idea of whom is formulated in Christian theology. The Christian moralist and the Christian theologian, accordingly, start from the same point ; and it is the purpose of this paper to discuss the relation which they sustain to each other and the mutual respect which they owe to each other.

postulates within its own domain, and allows them, to some extent at least, to exercise a determinative influence over the treatment of its own material. This view will be generally accepted, at least so far as Christian ethics is concerned.

But may it be demanded, now, that this relation should be reciprocal? May it be required that dogmatic theology also should admit ethical postulates within its sphere, and give them a decisive voice in the formulation of its doctrines? Or may theology in its formulation of doctrine violate the clear dictates of the moral reason even in its Christian form, as if theology and ethics, or religion and morality, had no relation to each other? Does the authority of the church, or the supposed authority of Scripture, absolve the theologian from the necessity of compliance with recognized ethical ideas and postulates? There is difference of opinion in regard to these questions; and the practice of theology has largely proceeded on the assumption that dogmatics is superior to ethics, and needs to take no advice from it. That theological doctrines often do conflict with current ethical principles and sentiments is a fact with which intelligent Christians are familiar. Not only dogmatics, but exegesis too, has at times contradicted the best and surest utterances of the moral reason, not only of individual Christians, but of Christendom. We need here only to refer to the ideas which exegetical theology once entertained in regard to the rights of civil rulers, and in regard to the lawfulness of human slavery. Subjects have been declared to have no rights which rulers are bound to respect, and slavery has been justified, on the authority of Scripture, in spite of the dictates of the moral sense and reason.

But to any objections to doctrinal propositions on ethical grounds the usual reply has been that the utterances of the moral reason cannot be weighed against the statements of revelation, because the reason is relative and imperfect, while revelation is absolute and infallible. The moral reason is, in its own nature, finite, and therefore progressive. But that which is capable of progress and change is at no stage of its development perfect. In regard to this position, however, it may be

remarked, in passing, that it is well understood now that theology is progressive, too, and that its results must, therefore, also be imperfect at any period of time. But it is alleged, further, that the moral reason has been weakened and perverted by the fall, and that its evidence, therefore, cannot be received as trustworthy. Revelation, on the other hand, it is said, gives us the absolute teaching of God. In revelation God speaks; and where God speaks it is the duty of the reason, in its practical as well as in its theoretical function, and in its regenerate as well as in its unregenerate state, to be silent. This is doubtless true; where God speaks, man's duty is to hear. But this reasoning forgets that in estimating theological doctrines we have to do with something more than the teaching of God in revelation: we have to do also with the service performed by the human reason in the interpretation of revelation. And when any theological doctrine conflicts with moral sense or feeling, the question is whether this conflict is to be set to the account of the revelation, or to the account of the interpretation. The idea, therefore, that theological dogmas are clothed with divine authority, because they are supposed to be derived from divine revelation, is, to say the least, rather naïve than conclusive. This idea has, however, been held by many in good faith; and when the theoretical reason, in its interpretation and elaboration of Scripture, has reached results which are repugnant to the moral sentiments, it has been coolly affirmed that where God speaks the moral sentiments are bound to be silent. Who art thou, O man, that repliest against God? This was Calvin's resort when he confessed that the decree of reprobation which his own logic had created, and which, according to his own definition, "involves so many nations, with their infants, in eternal death," is a horrible decree—*decretum quidem horribile, fateor*—but one that must nevertheless be believed on the authority of God and of Holy Scripture. To the argument that doctrines which violate the moral sentiments of men cannot be just and in harmony with the moral character of God, the usual answer has been that "the divine justice is too high to be measured by a human standard, or comprehended by the

littleness of the human mind." That was Calvin's answer to all such "quibbles," and means that God's justice is different from our justice—God's morality different from human morality, not merely in degree, but in kind, and that, therefore, it may very well happen that there may be revealed dogmas that shall contradict our moral sentiments. This gives a relative and contingent character to all human morality, and would, in the end, involve its total destruction.

It will be observed, then, that the question of the validity of ethical postulates in theology, upon which depends in fact the very existence of morality, is one which involves the further question as to the authority of our moral ideas and principles universally. What authority belongs to our moral ideas? Are they merely subjective conceptions, or do they correspond to an objective reality in the universe, as is supposed to be the case with our rational ideas by all who are not subjective idealists? The correct answer to this question, we believe, can best be reached by a brief inquiry into the origin and nature of our moral ideas. To such an inquiry we, therefore, now address ourselves. And as we are here writing mainly for theologians, who admit the general principles of theism, we need not spend any time in refuting the current theories of sensational or naturalistic ethics. The fact that our ethical ideas are gradually developed in connection with experience does not prove that they have their source in experience, or that they are derived from sensation. The origin and development of the moral ideas must be supposed to be analogous to the origin and development of the rational ideas in general; which, though conditioned by sensation, have not their origin in sensation, but in the nature and activity of the mind itself. To the old aphorism, "*In intellectu nihil est, quod non prius fuerit in sensu*," Leibniz, as is well known, added the words, "*nisi intellectus ipse*," implying that the mind itself is constitutionally a source of knowledge. So, we may say, there is nothing in our moral ideas, or in our moral knowledge, that was not previously in our moral experience, except the moral nature or conscience itself. The moral nature contains, in its constitution, principles which are developed

and brought into the light of consciousness by experience; and thus moral ideas are formed. Moral ideas, as such, are not innate any more than rational ideas are innate; but neither are they merely adventitious, that is, put into the mind from without by sensation. They are formed by the mind itself; but this is possible only because the mind is constitutionally endowed with moral principles capable of being developed.

But now, these moral principles, or primordial moral elements, the mind has not given to itself; and, therefore, the authority which belongs to them is not derived from the conscience which recognizes and enforces them. The conscience is not autonomic, or self-legislative, in the sense that its authority has its foundation merely in itself, but only in the sense that its mandates are formulated within itself and are not foreign to its own nature. The conscience is the witness of an authority which, though making itself heard in its own voice, is nevertheless objective. The law to which the conscience binds the will is recognized as a force established and maintained by an authority other than the subjective conscience. The law written in the heart, which it is the business of conscience to read and interpret to the reason and the will, was not written there by the conscience itself; it is the enactment and the writing of an authority that is superior to the conscience, and superior to the heart also, of the human subject. The conscience cannot recognize the validity of any legislation that contradicts this fundamental legislation impressed upon its own constitution; and in so far it is autonomic; but it is not autonomic in the sense of being the ultimate source of the authority which it proclaims. And it has no power ever to release the will from the obligation of that authority. The conscience, therefore, is the clearest evidence of the existence of a power that makes for righteousness, which is other than man, and upon which man's existence and nature are dependent. Our moral constitution, then, containing those principles out of which our moral ideas are developed, is the gift of the Being that has made us.

And what is the relation of this gift to the nature and character of that Being? Is it an arbitrary, an accidental gift,

determined by a groundless volition of the giver, or is it a gift necessarily determined by the character of the giver? In other words, what is it in God that forms the ground of moral obligation, and consequently of morality? Is it his will, or is it his nature? Is the moral law an arbitrary enactment of God that might have been otherwise than it is, or is it rational and necessary? There can be no doubt as to the answer which the Christian consciousness will give to this question. According to the Christian conception, man is the offspring of God, and therefore, in nature, akin to God. This thought is expressed on the very first page of the Bible in the proposition that God made man in his own image. The moral nature of man is a reflection of the nature of God; and the nature of God must, accordingly, be the ultimate principle of morality. To suppose that God determines what is good and what is evil by a mere act of arbitrary volition, which might be different from what it is, is to suppose that God himself is without moral character. But against such a supposition both Scripture and the moral consciousness agree in protesting. God is good, God is holy, God is righteous, God is love: these are propositions which the moral consciousness, in its Christian form at least, affirms no less decidedly than does Scripture. And here is the answer to the question which is sometimes asked so triumphantly: What is it that determines the nature of morality, if it is not the will of God? Surely, it cannot be anything outside of God! No, certainly not; but it is something in God—it is God's character. God wills the good, because he is himself good. The character of God is the standard of his will; and his will can, therefore, never be contrary to his nature, nor to the principles of the moral reason in man, which is a reflection of the moral nature of God. In other words, that which is right for man cannot be different from that which is right for God, nor that which is wrong for man different from that which is wrong for God.

But to this view, that morality is something objective in the nature of God, the objection is sometimes made that if God is not good, or does not make the good, by his volition, then he is not good freely, and thus morality after all disappears. This



objection involves a misconception of the nature of moral freedom. Moral freedom, in its perfect state, is not inconsistent with necessity. In the case of a finite moral being we may distinguish three stages in the development of freedom: first, the stage of *essential* freedom, before the awakening of the consciousness to the reality of the moral law, when the process of the moral life is spontaneous; secondly, the stage of *formal* freedom, commencing with the distinct presentation of the law in the conscience, which gives rise to the power of choice; and, thirdly, *real* freedom, when the good, or the necessity of the law, has, by a series of volitions, become the character of the person, and when the choice of evil has become an impossibility. In the case of a created being moral goodness can only be brought to pass by a process which involves the exercise of free choice; but when the process is completed and the character fully formed, the element of choice must fall away, and freedom must become one with necessity. In the case of God, however, who is eternal, no such process is either necessary or possible. We cannot conceive of God as passing eternally from a non-moral into a moral condition. He is unchangeably and eternally moral. But his morality is not for that reason unfree. He is not moral by compulsion, or by force of any necessity outside of him, but by the necessity of his own nature, which to obey is his highest freedom. There is thus a formal difference in the processes by which morality is realized in God and man; but that does not imply a difference in the contents of divine and human morality, or in the moral ideas and sentiments which are peculiar respectively to God and man.

The notion that the nature of God is indifferent to good and evil, and that this distinction is established merely by an arbitrary enactment of his will, "his good and sovereign pleasure," is, in fact, destructive of morality. If God is not what he requires the moral creature to be, on what ground can he make this requirement? If, for example, he hates his enemies, and can never forgive them until the debt which they owe is fully paid, on what ground can we be asked to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us? An authority that

issues commands without cause or reason, and that does not in itself realize the character which it demands in others, could not be respected, though it should be the sovereign authority of the universe. It is a totally unethical and false conception, begotten of abnormal states of human society, that sovereignty raises a being above the conditions, or above the sphere, of ethical determinations. God's sovereignty does not consist in being above the ethical requirements which he makes of the creature; and the creature can be moral only so long as it believes the Creator to be moral. Doubt of the moral character of the Creator would lead to moral skepticism on the part of the creature. Men will be moral only so long as they believe in the moral character of God. God's commands and the imperatives of the moral reason will be respected only so long as men are convinced of the truth of the saying, "Ye shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy;" or, in other words, so long as men are convinced that the character which the highest Christian conscience demands of them is the character eternally realized in God.

And what is the essential nature of the ethical character eternally realized in God may be inferred from the ethical ideal of the Christian consciousness: *it is love*. Men reared under the influence of Christianity, however far they may be from realizing the ideal of love in their life and conduct, will yet agree in affirming that that is the ideal which ought to be realized; it is the inmost core or principle of the divine law as it reveals itself in the conscience, and must therefore be the essential determination of the ethical character of God. And this is in agreement, certainly, with the teaching of the New Testament, according to which charity or love is the highest of all virtues, and the very essence of the life of God. "God is love," says the apostle who was nearest to the heart of Jesus, and penetrated most profoundly into the mystery of the divine life. The essence of love may be said to consist of self-communication and self-participation between personal beings, under certain limitations and conditions. God as love communicates himself with all his riches and gifts to the personal creature—a process which has its goal in the personal oneness of God and man in Christ, and in the

kingdom founded by Christ. The limitations necessarily belonging to this process are determined by the respect which the divine love owes to itself, on the one hand, and to its object, on the other. The divine love is bound to respect its own dignity and worth, and can, therefore, not communicate itself in blessing to one who is unwilling to receive it. This self-respect of the divine love may be defined as the *holiness* of God. But the divine love is bound also to respect the dignity and worth, or the rights, of its personal object. Now, the fundamental right of a personal being is the right to be itself and determine itself, or the right of freedom; and this right the divine love may not ignore or overthrow. A person who wills to reject the divine love, and suffer the consequent loss and pain, must be allowed to do so. This is his right, which God is bound to respect; and this respect of the divine love for the right of its object constitutes the divine *righteousness*. Righteousness, according to the old definition, is that quality of mind which gives to each one his due—*justitia animi affectio suum cuique tribuens*—and which may be punitive as well as benedictive, according to the attitude of its object. The divine righteousness, then, is not a quality in God standing over against his love and hindering its realization, but a determination of love itself, and adjusting the manner of its manifestation to that which is due to its object. Love is primary in God; and the first object of his desire, therefore, is not his own glory, but the actualization of his love in the blessedness of personal beings. In a world of sin, even, in which the divine love has been rejected and grieved, God cannot cease to love; for to do that would be to deny himself; but here the divine love can be realized only in the way of suffering and sacrifice on its own part, or in the way of atonement which abolishes sin and makes one the created with the creative will, thus realizing the eternal idea of love. It is, therefore, not true that "God *may* be merciful, but *must* be just." Mercy is as much a necessity for God as is justice, and has, in fact, a deeper root in his moral nature.

The essence of divine morality, or of the ethical character of God, then, consists in holy and righteous love. This, accordingly, must be the essence also of human morality, and the

truly moral and Christian man cannot consistently admit anything either in thought or action that contradicts the fundamental principle of his Christian character. The moral nature of man is designed to be a copy of the moral nature of God. In whatever way we may suppose the human soul to be derived from God, it must reflect in the essential features of its moral nature the character of its divine original. The biblical statement that man was made in the image of God can signify no less than that. But that statement must not be supposed to mean that man, as he comes from the hands of his Creator, is at once a *finished moral being*. That is not the case with man as he is born now, nor could it have been the case with the first man as he was created. A finished moral being cannot be created off-hand. Only *things* can be created in that way. The necessary form of morality is freedom, and moral character—a good conscience and a good will—can, therefore, not be given in creation, but can only be acquired by a process of free personal activity. The ethical character of God, for which human nature is preconstituted, can only become a personal possession by personal volition and effort. This proposition, indeed, may be regarded as one of those moral postulates which theology is bound to accept from ethics, and the non-acceptance of which brings confusion into much of our theological thought. We know how the older theology, which assumed that Adam was created in the full possession of righteousness and true holiness, was tormented by the problem of the fall. Here was a being made but little short of God—made in perfect wisdom, righteousness, and holiness—suddenly turned into a demon of total depravity. How could a being so highly endowed ever come to sin? That was the question; and we had doctrines of foreordination, of covenants, and of supernatural gifts, all alike unethical, to answer it. But no being could ever *be made* perfect in wisdom, and righteousness, and holiness; and consequently there could have been no such fall as the older theology imagined. A state of moral perfection is a state that can only be self-acquired. A moral being must be the architect of its own character. And this is a truth whose bearing must extend to

our conception of the end of human life, as well as to our conception of its beginning. In the light of this truth, what becomes of the familiar conceit that converted but unsanctified sinners are suddenly made perfect, when they die, by an operation of divine grace? Of course, however "comforting" such a doctrine may be supposed to be, it must be given up as contradicting the very fundamental conception of a moral being.

Moral character can only be built upon the basis of a nature, or of faculties, constitutionally predisposed to morality, by the exercise of personal freedom or exertion. But a moral nature is not of itself sufficient to develop into a state of actual morality, any more than an intellectual nature can, without any influence or stimulation from beyond itself, develop into a state of intelligence. Without experience the intellectual principles of the mind could at most develop into empty forms of thought, if any development at all were possible. And the same is true of the religious and moral nature. No moral ideas and sentiments could be developed without moral experience. Without experience such ideas and sentiments could have no contents. And the moral experience which makes possible the development of true moral ideas must consist essentially in vital contact of the human spirit with the spirit of its divine author. By an immediate touch of the infinite moral spirit the finite human spirit is quickened into an activity corresponding to the aptitudes of its nature, and to the character of the eternal source from which it came. And its subsequent development, the formation of moral ideas and the cultivation and growth of moral sentiments, must go forward under the same conditions. The moral life of a human individual, as well as the moral life of the race collectively, must be conceived as a discipline under the leading and stimulating influence of the divine spirit. And this stimulating influence universally we may call *divine revelation*; whose reality we must assume in order to the development of morality as well as of religion. Consequently, the developed moral condition of a human being—the existing state of his conscience and of his will—may be said to be the product of an objective divine and of a subjective personal factor. God and

man work together in the development of moral as well as religious life. And the result of this co-working of the divine spirit with the spirit of man in the depths of his soul is the reproduction of the moral character of God in the human personality in the degree of the voluntary receptivity of the latter. In this way the mind of God comes gradually to be the mind of man. This must be supposed to be the case relatively in all religious systems, for God has nowhere left himself without witness; but it must be the case most especially within Christianity. Here at least we are bound to assume that the moral ideas and judgments which are in man, and the moral sentiments which he entertains, are a reproduction of the moral disposition of God, and must, therefore, be of supreme validity for the regulation of thought as well as for the conduct of life. Certainly Christianity can teach no doctrines and require no actions that contradict the utterances of the conscience which it has itself created.

The conscience, it has been said, is the voice of God in man. This implies not merely that man knows his moral acts in relation to a divine rule or law, or that he knows them conjointly with God the supreme judge, but that the moral knowledge which at any time illuminates his conscience is a light derived from the eternal source of morality in God. But if this be so, why then, it may be asked, does the conscience not always and everywhere utter precisely the same judgments? Why does one man's conscience condemn what another's may seem to approve? The answer is, because man is a finite and progressive being, and can only appropriate progressively and freely the moral light which shines into his soul from the absolute source of light in God. His moral knowledge, like his rational knowledge, must be self-acquired. But this implies differences arising out of the action of the will, as well as out of the general stage of development of the individual and of the race. Subjective and objective influences may cause defect and error in the acquisition of moral knowledge. A man's conscience, or moral reason, is not infallible, any more than is his theoretical reason. The principles involved in the constitution of our moral nature and the moral impressions received from contact with the absolute moral

Being, as well as the moral teaching of history, may be misread and misinterpreted; and so we may get error in moral knowledge, just as we may have error in rational and religious knowledge. It is to be observed, however, that the danger of error seems to be far less great in moral than in rational and religious thinking; for men differ far less in regard to ethical than in regard to philosophical and theological questions. The moral ideas and sentiments of mankind are very much the same everywhere. Still, however, the possibility of error in the formation of our moral knowledge must always be recognized. Man is not infallible in any department of his being. But this fact does not discredit our moral knowledge. The conscience, though in regard to concrete questions of right and wrong capable of erring, is still the only light which a man has to guide him in the conduct of his moral life. A man is bound to follow the dictates of his conscience in preference to any laws or rules coming to him from any external source. No man can accept the teaching of any outward authority until such authority has approved itself to the judgment of his own reason and conscience. Even when in error the conscience can be corrected only by an appeal to its own judgment. But in this way it can always be corrected. Even in the case of the most degraded of men, whose conscience may seem to sanction the most atrocious crimes, there is always hope that their minds may be brought into a better state by an appeal to the deeper moral nature within them. The erring prodigal may "come to himself;" and when he has done so, he finds within himself a light that is divine and capable of rightly directing his moral understanding. But whether right or wrong, no man can ever have any other guide to direct him in the conduct of his moral life than his own conscience; and no one can rightly accept for truth anything that does not authenticate itself to his moral as well as theoretical reason.

This is especially true of the Christian, and most especially of the Protestant Christian. The Protestant Christian who believes in justification by faith—and faith that is *his own* and not another's—cannot allow himself to be governed either in his

moral or religious thinking by any authority that contradicts his Christian conscience. The Christian's conscience may in a special sense be said to be the product of Christianity; and if Christianity is from God, then the common Christian conscience, or consciousness, of an age must ever be an essentially true reflection of the ethical nature of God; and this must, therefore, be the supreme criterion of judgment in regard to doctrinal as well as practical questions. Questions which may once have become *live* questions to the Christian conscience, and which have received a decisive answer in the forum of the same, can no longer be uncertain questions for any Christian mind. In regard to things which have not yet come really under the illuminating influence of the Christian spirit there may be doubt, and even error. The Christian conscience is progressive in its development, and, in contact with the advancing life of the world, extends its interest to an ever-enlarging circle of things, in regard to which it formulates judgments; and these judgments, then, cannot be ignored or set aside by any formal authority. There may be current in any age ideas and practices upon which the light of the Christian spirit has not yet been shed, and these may not reflect the absolute moral spirit. But ideas which have been formed under the direct influence of the Christian spirit, and which have become an essential part of the Christian consciousness, cannot be reckoned in this category. Their validity cannot be questioned by any individual Christian, nor impeached by any authority. They must be accepted as divine truth. Though one may be aware that God's thoughts are not as our thoughts, and God's ways not as our ways, so far as degrees of perfection are concerned, yet in regard to ideas and sentiments which have become part of the fixed contents of the collective Christian conscience, no one can have any doubt that they reflect the ideas and sentiments of God. Thus the Christian conscience may bear witness to a man that he has "the mind of the Lord;" and then no authority of state, or church, or Scripture could move him to renounce his convictions, either in regard to questions of doctrine or practice. Conflicts between the ethical determinations of the Christian conscience and the teaching of



outward authority have from time to time arisen; and then it seemed as if the human mind had come to stand in opposition to Christianity itself, and as if a deadly war had come to exist between reason and revelation. But by and by the conflict ceases, the Christian moral reason triumphs; and when the smoke of battle has cleared away, it is found that Christianity, instead of being injured, has actually been benefited by what has occurred. The conflict was really not with Christianity itself, but with some pseudo-authority parading in its name.

The subject of slavery has already been mentioned as affording an illustration of a supposed conflict between the moral sentiment of mankind and the authority of divine revelation. There was a time, as is well known, when theology proved the lawfulness of slavery by the authority of Scripture. The argument seemed to be strong. Noah, it was said, predicted the eternal servitude of the descendants of Ham, that is, the negroes; and prophecy must be fulfilled. The patriarchs, moreover, were all slave-owners; and there is not a word of disapprobation of the institution in the Old Testament. Indeed, slavery existed by divine law in the Hebrew commonwealth. There were certain mitigations of the institution in favor of Hebrew slaves, but these were not applicable to foreigners. But the New Testament is as decidedly in favor of the institution as the Old. Slavery existed in the time of our Lord and his apostles, and they never uttered a word of condemnation against it. On the contrary, Paul even goes so far as to urge Christian slaves, if they had a chance of becoming free, to prefer remaining in a state of bondage (1 Cor. 7:21). Moreover, he sent back the fugitive Onesimus to his master, showing that he regarded a master's right of property as more sacred than a soul's right of freedom. Slavery, therefore, exists by the authority of divine revelation; and what is human sentiment that it should set itself in opposition to this authority? Where God speaks, let all the earth keep silence before him. So the argument ran during the second quarter of the present century, and was proclaimed from many a pulpit both North and South. But the time came when Christian men could be no longer satisfied with this argument. It

involved a violation of their moral sentiments and of the clearest dictates of their moral reason. It was against the principles of love and justice. The voice of God which was supposed to be heard in Scripture jarred painfully with the voice of God in their consciences. Which of these voices was to be obeyed? The conflict was long and sharp; but at last, in spite of the powerful influence of selfishness and passion, supported by what many believed to be the authority of divine revelation, the voice of humanity prevailed; as it always must prevail in similar cases, if its origin and nature be such as we have already seen. Albert Barnes is said once to have remarked that he did not believe the doctrine of slavery to be in the Bible, but if it was there, then so much the worse for the Bible. At this, of course, men held up their hands and shouted *infidelity!* But they did it for the most part only in a half-hearted way, for the conscience of the age, their own included, was against their theology. And now the conscience has completely triumphed, and no one would pretend to defend the institution of slavery by the authority of the Bible. But the Bible, meanwhile, has not lost anything in authority and in the respect of mankind. The divinity of the Christian consciousness has triumphed over the divinity, not of the Bible, but of exegesis. The Bible was not used as it is intended to be used, when men got from it propositions which contradicted the best moral sense of mankind. We now understand that the Bible interpreted "according to the proportion of faith," as St. Paul says that prophets should speak (Rom 12:6), does by no means favor any institution by which men are deprived of the rights of their personality and degraded to the condition of chattels held merely for the profit and gratification of their fellows. Whatever the Bible may say in single passages, in which it merely reflects the temporary conditions and opinions of the age in which it originated, the general spirit of its teaching, and especially its exalted view of the dignity and value of the human soul, are utterly inconsistent with the doctrine of slavery. Christ's conception of human personality is not reconcilable with any theory, either in politics or theology, that would reduce man merely to the condition of a thing. And

so God's speaking in the Bible does not, on this point, contradict his speaking in the Christian conscience.

But dogmatic theology especially affords illustrations of the antagonism between theological definition and ethical principles, of which we are now speaking. Such antagonisms have appeared especially in the doctrine of sin, and in the doctrine of soteriology. Here the ethical character which dogmatics itself, in its doctrine of God, attributes to him, is often utterly forgotten, and he is represented as violating the commonest ethical principles in his dealings with men. For instance, outside of theology, it is a universally recognized principle that personal freedom and responsibility are correlative. No person can be morally responsible for acts and states which he has not himself voluntarily caused, either directly or indirectly. One person cannot be held guilty of another person's sins, nor can the punishment deserved by one be justly inflicted upon another. And conversely, the merits or moral worth of one person cannot be set to the account of another of unlike moral character. No moral principle is regarded as more immutably fixed than that. It is the principle of the *suum cuique*—the principle that every moral being must be free to be himself, and to enjoy the fruits of his own conduct, if good; and the penalty, if evil. But now this fundamental principle of justice has been violated by a whole series of dogmatic definitions, about some of which a fierce battle is still raging. It is violated, for instance, by the doctrine of absolute predestination, according to which the eternal weal or woe of men is determined, not by their own freedom, but by the absolute and causeless pleasure of the Creator. To the objection that it is unjust for God to doom some men to destruction without any fault of theirs, while others, no better than these, may be saved, the reply has sometimes been made that this is not unjust, because God would have had the right to damn all as having sinned in Adam; and if he chooses to forego this right in relation to some, that is a matter of his sovereignty, which puts him above all consideration of such moral principles as those by which we are bound. On the same ground the doctrine has been defended that the very first sin, the fall itself, came to pass in consequence

of a divine foreordination, in order that God might have objects of wrath to punish for the manifestation of his most glorious justice, and objects of love to save for the manifestation of his mercy. And that is the doctrine which has so often been commended for its complete logical consistency. But what are mercy and justice according to this conception? Manifestly they are not the ethical qualities which we understand by these terms, but mere arbitrary determinations. And this is virtually admitted when it is maintained that God is not bound by the claims of justice, because he is the sovereign creator of justice. But that means, if it means anything, that God himself is without moral character; and that supposition, if taken in real earnest, would, as we have already seen, mean the death of all morality among men. What, then, shall we say to this doctrine of predestination? Shall we say that it is a mystery of revelation, which we are bound to accept on the authority of Scripture and the church, though we cannot reconcile it with the principles of our moral nature? We cannot do that, because, as we have before seen, we are bound to hold that the essential principles of our moral nature, especially as the latter has been developed under Christian influences, reflect the ethical character of God. If that be true, then it is simply impossible that God can deal with men as this doctrine teaches. The doctrine is unethical, and can therefore not be true. And if we believe that the Bible is the record of a true revelation of God, then we must believe that this doctrine cannot be in the Bible. We know what may be said in opposition to this position; it may be said that this is exalting faith above the Scriptures—it is making the moral reason the judge of Scripture teaching. But, after all, the objection is not as serious as it may at first appear to be; for what do those do who take the opposite view? They virtually assume the infallibility, not only of the Bible, but of the theoretical reason by which the Bible is interpreted. We prefer the authority of the moral sense of Christendom to the authority of the theoretical understanding of the individual theologian; and in the case of the individual theologian we prefer the authority of his heart to the authority of his head,

where these fail to coincide. This is not touching the honor or authority of the Bible. In fact, the Bible gains in influence and in respect by being freed from responsibility for a doctrine which contradicts the profoundest sentiment of the Christian heart, and robs God of the most essential attribute of his being, namely, that of holy and righteous love. The rejection of this doctrine may leave some unsolved difficulties. There may be mysteries in God's plan and government of the world, in regard to which we may have to plead ignorance. But it is important that this ignorance should be rightly located. If we are sure that "God is love indeed, and love creation's final law," then we can afford to be ignorant in regard to some of the ways in which that divine love is realized in the world.

Again, the ethical principle of justice has been violated by some of the definitions which have been put forward in creeds and dogmatic systems concerning what is called original or hereditary sin. Manifestly, if sin be a determination of freedom, then it cannot be propagated as such by the mere process of natural generation; nor can its universality be accounted for on the realistic theory of the inclusion of the persons of all men in the person of Adam. To say that *mankind* sinned when Adam sinned may be correct as a logical statement, but it contains what has been called the fallacy of the universal, and, in fact, means nothing. The usual refuge of the dogmatist has, therefore, been in the theory of *imputation*. God made Adam the federal head of the race by a covenantal arrangement, with the adoption of which neither he nor his posterity had anything to do. And, when Adam sinned, God, in agreement with the terms of the covenant, imputed the guilt of his sin to his posterity; and so it comes to pass now that, in consequence of that divine judgment, not only are all men born with a vitiated nature which deserves the divine wrath, but also under actual condemnation on account of Adam's sin. This may be logical, but it is not ethical. If men were merely impersonal things, then any disposition might be made of them, or any imaginary qualities might be attributed to them, or fictions adopted in regard to them, without doing them any wrong; as it is doing

no wrong to a block of wood moving on a chess-board to regard it and treat it as a bishop or a pawn, and not as a queen. But as personal beings men have rights which even their Creator is bound to respect; and the fundamental right of personality is *to be itself*, and to determine its own character and destiny, and to be responsible for itself and for nothing more. The fact that in consequence of the solidarity of human life in this world, especially on its physical side, all men are profoundly affected by the actions of all, and some frequently suffer for the sins of others, while it may create difficulties in our theodicy, does not prove that ethical qualities, with their merits and demerits, may by a divine fiat be transferred from one person to another. It only proves that our natural life is not yet completely ethicized; and that there may be in it wrongs which hereafter must be made right; but not at all that those wrongs may really be forms of a higher justice, which is to us incomprehensible. Our moral reason may not forbid our admitting that, in a world of development and change, injustice in particular parts may be permitted temporarily for the greater good of the whole; but our moral reason does protest against the idea of making this temporary injustice eternal, and of supposing it to have its basis in an arbitrary fiat of the sovereign Creator of the world.

But this idea of making right and wrong, or innocence and guilt, dependent upon a divine fiat has found still wider application in the sphere of soteriology. Both the doctrines of the atonement and of justification have been explained on this principle, namely, the principle that moral qualities may, by an act of the divine will, be imputed from one subject to another. Thus God is said to have imputed to Christ the sins of men, or at least those of the elect; then Christ suffered the penalty which was due to them, and the merit thus acquired is now imputed to believers for their justification. Christ has paid the debt, which sinners could not pay, by undergoing the penalty which their sins deserved, and has thus made it possible for the sinners themselves to go clear. Such is the theory which has been adopted in creeds and dogmatic systems, stripped of all unnecessary verbiage designed to disguise its unethical

character. The whole thing is a commercial, not an ethical, transaction. As one man may pay another's debt in bank, so the innocent may suffer the punishment of the guilty, and then justice will be satisfied, and the guilty may escape. Such a conception is possible so long as the notions of sin, and guilt, and punishment are supposed to stand merely for commercial, or, at most, legal entities, but must break down so soon as they are perceived to represent ethical realities. One man may pay another man's debt, if he has the means to do it, but one man may not bear the penalty of another's sin in such a way as to discharge the latter's guilt. In the one case we have to do with a commercial, in the other with an ethical, relation. No tribunal of justice may punish one man for another man's crime, or acquit a criminal in consideration of another man's merit. Against such a proceeding the moral sense of all mankind would cry out with indignation. But can we suppose that God may rightly do what it would not be right for man to do? "Shall mortal man be more just than God? Shall a man be more pure than his Maker?" "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?"

But this theory of moral substitution sometimes puts on the airs of an ethical necessity, and parades in the guise of an advocate of absolute justice. It says that sins can be forgiven and salvation accomplished only in the way of strict righteousness. But righteousness demands strict reciprocity or equivalence. God's justice requires inexorably that the penalty of sin be paid. He cannot relinquish or relax anything of his claims. His justice must be satisfied, either by the suffering of the sinner or by the suffering of someone in his stead, before any mercy can be shown. Thus justice, instead of being a quality of love, becomes an absolute tyrant in the nature of God. But, it may be asked, whence comes this idea of justice, which leaves no room for forgiveness? It certainly does not come from the moral sense of mankind in its best and highest condition. The Christian conscience does not pronounce the idea of forgiveness irreconcilable with the conception of justice. So far is this from being the case that forgiveness is regarded as an exercise of the

highest virtue. *To forgive is divine.* Nor does this idea of unforgiving justice come from Scripture. Scripture does not teach that forgiveness is a violation of righteousness, and that the idea of justice requires that every sin be strictly punished before it can be forgiven. And, besides, what sort of justice is that which is so intent upon punishment that it cares not upon whom this may fall, whether upon the innocent or upon the guilty? What sort of justice is that which can be appeased by the suffering of an innocent person instead of the sinner? How can such justice commend itself to the moral sense of mankind? But here, again, we may be met with the answer that God's justice is too deep for our comprehension. The whole thing, it may be said, is a mystery which we cannot penetrate with our finite understanding. That may be; but, if so, what right have we to set up definitions about it? If we cannot understand how the justice of God may be satisfied by the suffering of the innocent for the guilty, how, then, can we say that this is the divine method of the atonement? Would it not be more reasonable to confess total ignorance than to attribute to God principles and motives which we would not dare to entertain ourselves? At the risk of prolixity, we repeat: If we cannot know how God could consistently with justice punish the innocent Christ for the sins of guilty men, how can we know that he has done it? But what else, it may be replied, could the passion of Christ have been, if it was not the penalty of the sins of the world? Well, that is the question; and it is not our purpose in this paper to furnish the answer. Our purpose is to insist that whatever answer may be given must be consistent with sound ethical principles. That the suffering of Christ was vicarious suffering, of course, admits of no doubt; but there is much vicarious suffering in the world that is not punitive, and that discharges no guilt. For instance, the child of an intemperate parent may be suffering the consequences of that parent's sin; but that does not make the guilt of the parent any less, and can therefore not be *penal* in its character. But what, then, does this vicarious suffering mean? We know not; perhaps we cannot know at present. There may be mysteries which we cannot



understand until the plan of the moral universe shall lie fully wrought out before us. We may have to confess ignorance in regard to many things which we have heretofore thought ourselves fully able to explain. But, if we take this ground, our compensation will be that we shall have a God whose moral nature is akin to ours, and whom, therefore, we can love, and that we shall have *doctrines that can be preached* to nineteenth-century audiences.

Is it not a fact that some of the central dogmas of theology are of such a character now that they cannot be preached to common Christian people? They are either not understood at all, or, where understood, they awaken only surprise and opposition. They meet with no response on the part of the common ethical spirit of the age. What meaning, for instance, can this age see in the doctrine of total depravity? Men feel that they are bad enough, but they know, too, that they are not totally bad. And if they were, what use would there be, then, in preaching to them? And, then, what sentiments are awakened by telling people that their little children are under sentence of damnation because of the sin committed by the first man? The reality and universality of sin are everywhere felt to be sad and painful facts; but to be told that this is all the consequence of an arbitrary decree and covenant of Almighty God, and that we and our children are being punished for sins which we have never committed, does not tend to awaken in us sentiments either of penitence or piety. We simply feel that such a doctrine contradicts the teaching of our ethical nature and cannot be true. And so we also feel when salvation is declared to be the result either of a series of formal ceremonies imposed by the church, or of a series of legal fictions floating in the mind of God. There is about all this an air of arbitrariness and of unreality that cannot fail to render it suspicious. It does not commend itself to the deepest wants of men's moral nature; and they cannot be willing to trust their salvation to a gospel that comes to them in such doubtful terms. Men want a real gospel, a gospel that shall bring to them a real, rational God—a God who, though holy and righteous, can forgive their sins—and a real Savior, who shall

heal the infirmities of their souls, and help them to overcome the tendencies to sin in their nature. In a word, men want an ethical gospel, a gospel that shall harmonize with the fundamental ethical principles of their nature, which, with all its corruption, is still the essential reflection of the moral nature of God. Such a gospel will not be rejected. The present widespread disaffection of the masses toward the church, we verily believe, has not its cause so much in the native depravity of the human heart, or in the prevailing influence of "infidel science which denies the supernatural," as in the unethical form in which the gospel has been so generally presented. And this unethical presentation of the gospel, we hold, has not been true to Christ and the New Testament, and was, therefore, *bound to fail*. Let the ethical teaching of Christ — the ethical teaching of the New Testament, which is in harmony with the ethical postulates of the moral nature of man — be cordially recognized in the formulation of Christian doctrine and duty, and then the gospel will again be everywhere joyfully received as the power of God and the wisdom of God.